

THE *saint* MAGAZINE

July, 1984

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JACK RITCHIE

*The world of mystery fiction lost a great creative talent when Jack Ritchie died in the spring of 1983. He was and is an internationally renowned writer of mystery short stories, having more than 500 published. One of his stories, **The Absence of Emily**, captured the coveted Edgar award, presented by the Mystery Writers of America, in 1981. Another, **A New Leaf**, was made into a movie. Several more have been adapted for television.*

His intriguing tales have been reprinted in more than 30 anthologies, and a number of them have appeared in England, Germany, South Africa, Norway, Switzerland, and other countries.

Ritchie is a specialist in brevity and relies on wry humor rather than gore. These qualities will be especially evident when you accept our invitation for a—very brief, we expect—visit to ...

THE HOUSE OF YORICK

It was dusk when the headlights of their car turned into my driveway. I watched as the automobile proceeded through the avenue of twisted bare trees and parked immediately behind my sedan in front of the house.

I waited until they used the knocker and then opened the door. "Good evening," I said somberly.

They were Mr. and Mrs. Randall. They had written ahead saying that they were prepared to rent my house for at least one month.

I do not like renting my home. I detest it. However, I have no other source of income and so, periodically, I am forced to do so.

Mr. Randall was tall, well-dressed, and had a look of skepticism on his face. "So this is the haunted house?"

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"Yes," I said. "Please come in."

They entered the large dim vestibule, and I led them directly to my study.

Mrs. Randall was a bit more impressed by her surroundings than her husband. "Clara Mercer told us all about your place."

"Ah, yes," I said. "She saw the Medusa, didn't she?"

Mrs. Randall nodded eagerly. "She was upstairs in the bedroom combing her hair when this Medusa came right through the wall, her eyes gleaming, that dirty smile on her face, and those snakes in her hair wriggling and writhing."

I smiled. "According to the legend, Mrs. Mercer should have turned to stone."

"Well, she didn't," Mrs. Randall said. "She just shrieked and ran out of the room, down the stairs, and right out the front door. She wouldn't come back into the house for anything. Her husband had to do the packing, and they left right away."

"He wouldn't talk to her for weeks," Randall said. "He was sore about losing the rent money he'd paid."

"That was unfortunate," I agreed. "But I do have my rules; and without rules, you know, the world becomes anarchy."

I went to my desk and pulled out a printed form. "I wish you would read this carefully before you sign. It stipulates the amount of the rental and, further, that none of the money will be returned to you if you decide to leave before the end of the month. Also, you will notice, I am absolved from all injuries you might incur—physical, mental, or emotional—while you occupy this house or are in the process of leaving."

I smiled faintly. "Several years ago a Mr. Wilkinson broke his leg while fleeing the building. He sued. I won the case, of course, but it was a nuisance. So I decided to add the anti-suing clause."

"Have you been living here alone?" Mrs. Randall asked.

"Oh, yes. Quite alone. I prefer it that way."

"But it's such a *big* house."

"Yes. It is rather large. Twenty-two rooms."

Mr. Randall had been studying the paintings hanging on the walls—the ruined castle in the moonlight, the graveyard scene from Hamlet. He seemed particularly interested in the oil depicting snapping wolves in pursuit of a troika over the snowy landscape. He turned back to me. "So this ghost appears as Medusa?"

"Not necessarily," I said. "He is able to take many forms."

"He?" Randall snorted. "Does this ghost have a name?"

"I call him Yorick."

Randall smiled tightly. "I have never seen a ghost, and I don't ever intend to."

"Good for you, sir." I turned to Mrs. Randall. "Have you ever experienced any apparitions? Or had any recurring nightmares?"

"It's funny that you should ask," she said, and shuddered. "When I was a little girl, we used to have our milk delivered. Our milkman was a giant sort of a person with only one ear and a terrible scar on his face. My mother used to say that if I didn't behave, he would carry me away some day. And do you know, to this very day, I have horrible dreams about that actually happening."

There was a sudden sharp clatter from upstairs, and Mrs. Randall started. "What was that?"

"Just a tree branch lashing a window," I said. "The wind seems to be picking up."

It is extremely difficult to rent a large Victorian house situated in an isolated countryside. People simply do not like the solitude. They prefer neighbors near, access to shopping centers, and the like. Realizing this, when I advertise for rental, I find it necessary to mention that my house is haunted.

It is commonly supposed that haunted houses *repel* people. Actually, quite the reverse is true. They attract them. Like flies.

It is not that most people would actually care to live in a haunted house for any length of time, but they *are* challenged to test the house for a night, a week, or a month—

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and are willing to pay rather handsomely for the opportunity.

Since the spring of this year, I have rented my home nineteen times to couples, or families. None of them, as far as I know, have remained in my house for even as much as one entire night.

Mr. and Mrs. Randall signed the form before I led them upstairs to the large bedroom I'd prepared. As we entered, Mrs. Randall suddenly stopped and listened. "Did you hear that?" she asked anxiously.

I nodded. "These old houses create noises of their own—the building settling, you know, old timbers creaking, perhaps a squirrel scrambling across the roof. During the day, one scarcely notices these things; but in the darkness of the night, they seem to be strangely magnified."

I smiled. "Your husband seems to be so level-headed. Apparently, he has never seen any ghosts or had nightmares the way most imaginative people do."

"But he *does* have one nightmare that comes and goes," Mrs. Randall said. "It started after we saw *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. That night he woke up screaming that the hound was after him. And I can tell whenever he dreams about the dog, because his feet churn up the sheets like he's running."

"Nonsense," Randall snapped. "I do not have nightmares about any damn dog."

I nodded approvingly. "That, sir, is your best defense. Simply keep telling yourself over and over again that you will not see a huge brown slavering mastiff."

He frowned retrospectively. "Slavering?" Then he pulled himself together and glared at me. "I, for one, do not intend to let my imagination get the better of me tonight."

After I left them, I packed my overnight bag and went out to my car. I heard the far-away howl of a farm dog. He was soon joined by a chorus of others, their cries echoing and re-echoing over the bleak countryside. Yes, a perfect night.

I drove to the village some four miles distant and got my usual room in Mrs. McFee's boarding house.

I slept nicely. Then, after a good breakfast, I drove back to my home.

The driveway was empty, and the front door swung open to the wind.

I went upstairs to the Randalls' bedroom. That door, too, had been left open. I glanced about. One of them seemed to have had enough presence of mind to pack their suitcases before they left. This does not always happen.

I wondered what they had seen. The huge brown slaver-ing mastiff? Or the monster milkman?

I listened to the brisk autumn wind tugging at the shutters and decided that the Randalls would be the last renters for this season.

It was just about time for me to settle in for the winter. I am quite a homebody. It always pains me to leave the house, even if it is for just one night.

I went down to my study, made a fire, then selected a volume of fantasy stories I'd read and re-read and would read again.

I sat down in my favorite easy chair.

Yes, it is remarkable how people will see the things they fear.

I, myself, have a recurring dream in which I find myself in a huge opera house. In one of the opposite boxes, there stands a tall man enveloped in a black cloak, his gleaming, piercing eyes riveted on mine. In my dream, I seem to zoom in closer and closer—somewhat like a television camera—until his eyes become his entire face. Shimmering, horrifying . . .

A milky, elongated mist formed beside my armchair. It swirled and twisted, slowly solidifying into a dark-cloaked figure with huge burning eyes that bored into mine malevolently.

I suppose that very few of the people who have rented my home and later fled into the night choose to believe, even now, that what they saw was other than the product of

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their fevered imaginations—spurred on by the general atmosphere of the house and perhaps some nudging upon my part.

But they are wrong. There really *is* a ghost in this house. His name is Yorick, and he is able to assume any form he chooses.

Now he hovered over me, eyes tremendous and alive with menace.

We are the best of friends, but he was being playful again.

"Now, Yorick," I admonished, "*stop* that."

He apologized. "Sorry, Henry, I just couldn't resist it." He faded gracefully into the air all about me.

I lit my pipe and we began reading.

ST

TO BE CAUGHT RED-HANDED

Criminal detection as a science was unknown before the middle of the nineteenth century. Earlier ages depended upon two methods: 1) securing a confession by torture of a suspect, or 2) catching a man in the act of committing a crime. Circumstantial evidence was not admitted in court.

In the case of persons of good reputation, it was dangerous to try to force a confession of an alleged crime. A farmer or tradesman well-liked in the community might be suspected of all kinds of lawbreaking, but officers were reluctant to touch him without actually surprising him in the act of committing a crime.

One of the most common felonies of the period was that of butchering another man's sheep, pig, or cow. Even possession of the fresh meat did not constitute proof of guilt in such cases. Only when a man was caught with the dead animal, and with blood on his hands, could he be arrested with certainty of a conviction.

Any man caught red-handed wasted his breath if he pleaded for mercy. So the expression came to be applied to surprising a person in any act of stealth, whether in violation of the law or not.

Marvin Vanoni